Tired of Meaning

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Log

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Earlier in the film, Croker tells his gang that "the only way to get through it [the crime] is we all work together as a team, and that means you do everything I say." But would anyone occupying a position in that teetering motor coach (or architecture itself) risk putting forth an uncritical solution (much less an architectural style or genre) based solely upon the personal, singular, and potentially dangerous (if not deadly) terms of a well-dressed and charming pied piper? As Somol and Whiting suggest, you might just get a plan handed to you, and it might just succeed, but it is doubtful that you will be handed a second plan, much less an architectural idea. That happens in a really bad movie or an unbelievably lucky architectural career. Perhaps it would pay to keep assessing the architectural situation, to ask questions along the way, and to stay critical after all.

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The interrogation of critical architecture that has emerged in the past few years has not, as some have claimed, been a collective assault on theory. Sarah Whiting and R. E. Somol's notion of a "projective" architecture is commonly grouped within the postcritical camp, but it would be a mistake to call them antitheoretical.[1] Theirs is partly a generational struggle.[2] But there is more at stake in Whiting and Somol's struggle with Michael Hays and Peter Eisenman than an Oedipal complex. Underpinning the work, or theory, of Hays and Eisenman is a presupposition that architecture is part of a signifying process, that it is about making and interpreting meaning. Whiting and Somol are tired of meaning. They advance a theory of architecture as delivery and presentation (not representation). Projective architecture, then, represents an attempt to come to terms with the last three decades of architectural theory in the US. This is a reorientation of architectural theory away from reading and signification and toward force, effects, and, ultimately, sensation.

Hays and Eisenman are part of a generation of critics who endorse the use of structuralist and poststructuralist theories in architectural discourse. The translation of literary theory into architectural discussions was not a homogeneous project. Yet, theorists from Charles Jencks to Mark Wigley have shared a reliance on linguistic analogies to structure their theories of architecture.[3] The importation of semiological theory into American architectural discourse in the 1960s and 1970s both marked the maturity of theoretical discussions and had a sustained influence. Semiological tools and concepts produced a discursive field in which meaning, or the negation of meaning, was the dominant form of theoretical engagement.

The critical architecture of Hays and Eisenman is motivated by the concept of the *index*, a semiological term that describes a causal relationship between signifier and signified. According to Eisenman, in Le Corbusier's Maison Dom-ino, "the sign is a record of an intervention."[4] This is an architecture about architecture. Self-referentiality provides a disciplinary autonomy that allows Eisenman to turn the Maison Dom-ino against the history of architecture as a critical tool.

1. R. E. Somol and Sarah Whiting, "Notes around the Doppler Effect and Other Moods of Modernism," *Perspecta* 33 (2002): 72–77.
2. George Baird, "'Criticality' and its Discontents," *Harvard Design Magazine* 21 (Fall 2004/Winter 2005): 16–21. Reinhold Martin, "Critical of What?: Toward a Utopian Realism," *Harvard Design Magazine* 22 (Spring/Summer 2005): 104–09.
3. Charles Jencks, *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*, 4th rev. enl. ed. (New York: Rizzoli, 1984). Mark Wigley, *The Architecture of Deconstruction: Derrida's Haunt* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993).
4. Peter Eisenman, "Aspects of Modernism: Maison Dom-ino and the Self-Referential Sign," in *Eisenman Inside Out: Selected Writings, 1963–1988, Theoretical perspectives in architectural history and criticism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 120.

Hays's critical architecture is necessarily situated between affirmative cultural production and formalist autonomy.[5] Mies's architecture of the interwar period illustrates Hays's proposition that *meaning* is limited, contingent, and in the world. "Meaning," according to Hays, "is made a function of impersonal productive systems rather than of formal operations or of representational devices."[6] The brilliance of Mies's Barcelona Pavilion emerges from the inversion of indexical signs. Columns dissolve in an invasion of light, upsetting a reading of them as visual signs of material support. The inversion of indexical signification in Mies's work allows Hays to claim that "this is an architecture that cannot be reduced either to a conciliatory representation of external forces or to a dogmatic, reproducible formal system."[7]

Whether architecture is simply about architecture, or whether it is in some sense oppositional, is not an issue for Whiting and Somol. Their problem is that the critical architectural tradition represented by Hays and Eisenman cannot escape theorizing architecture as meaning. The critical architectural project is "architecture inevitably and centrally preoccupied by its status as representation, and its simultaneous commentary on that condition."[8] Thus, Whiting and Somol propose a theory of architecture that requires a nonsemiological mode of engagement. This is not to say that they have abandoned theory as such. They are simply not explicit about the architectural traditions on which they draw.

Whiting and Somol's use of the "Doppler effect" in their definition of projective architecture remains ill-defined and ultimately obscure. But the crucial term is *effect*. Projective architecture acquires its definition through words such as force, effect, coolness, expression, and delivery. "Additionally, [projective architecture] is not a reading strategy – that is, it is not just an unfolding reading of an artwork – but an atmospheric interaction. It foregrounds the belief that both the subject and the object carry and exchange information and energy."[9] This is a theory that reintroduces the body and sensuous experience into architectural discourse.

The "coolness" discussed by Whiting and Somol does not refer to hipness, trendiness, or simply being "with it." Their use of cool refers to Marshal McLuhan's media theory, in which "cool media are high in participation or completion by the audience."[10] A cool, projective architecture proposes an increased attention to the relationship between bodies and buildings. When Whiting and Somol extend their definition of projective architecture to performance, they simply emphasize the presentational, effect-driven, and corporeal

5. K. Michael Hays, "Critical Architecture: Between Culture and Form," *Perspecta* 21 (1984): 15–29.
6. Ibid., 21.
7. Ibid., 17.
8. Somol and Whiting, "Notes around the Doppler Effect and Other Moods of Modernism," 74.
9. Ibid., 76.
10. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: Signet, 1964), 36.

elements of architecture. The crucial difference between the projective and the critical is that the latter presupposes meaning to be the primary mode of architectural engagement, while the former engages on the level of nonsignifying effects.

Unwittingly, and without notice, Whiting and Somol have revived a sensationalist theory of architecture. Geoffrey Scott, the early 20th-century theorist of architectural empathy, had already leveled what might be seen as a critique of semiological theories of architecture in 1914. Scott's critique of the "literary fallacy" in architecture prefigures Whiting and Somol's antipathy to architecture as reading. According to Scott, such a view "neglects the fact that in literature meaning, or fixed association, is the universal term; while in architecture the universal term is the sensuous experience of substance and form."[11] Scott's theory of architecture as effect can be traced back much further than the early 20th century. It remains an open question whether Whiting and Somol ultimately derive their theories from the tradition of 18th-century garden theory, which was crystallized into architectural discourse by Nicolas Le Camus de Mézières in 1780.[12] It is clear, however, that they are invoking a theoretical tradition within architecture that has a formidable history.

What are the consequences of this realignment of architectural theory? Scott concluded that to understand architecture in terms of meaning is to limit our experience of that art. "It is reasonable," said Scott, "to claim that the aesthetic enjoyment which is proper and special to a given art should be the first and the necessary consideration, and that in relation to this the quality of a style should primarily be appraised."[13] Does a reorientation toward projective practice necessarily lead to the emergence of architectural formalism? Whiting and Somol's interest in the architect as an expert in design should give us pause: "Design encompasses object qualities (form, proportion, materiality, composition, etc.) but it also includes qualities of sensibility, such as effect, ambiance, and atmosphere."[14] Is design the formal autonomy of the discipline? According to Hays and Eisenman, autonomy provided a space from which to pose a critique. Do Whiting and Somol propose autonomy in order to provide a space for something *more* than architectural ensembles with great ambiance and atmosphere? Or is this something *more* simply not, in Scott's words, their first and necessary consideration?

11. Geoffrey Scott, *The Architecture of Humanism: A Study in the History of Taste* (New York: Norton, 1999), 57.
12. Nicolas Le Camus de Mézières, *The Genius of Architecture, or, The Analogy of That Art with Our Sensations*, trans. David Britt (Santa Monica: Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1992).
13. Scott, *The Architecture of Humanism*, 58.
14. Somol and Whiting, "Notes around the Doppler Effect and Other Moods of Modernism," 75.
I would like to thank Mary McLeod for her helpful comments on this essay.

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